DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 523 RC 018 206

AUTHOR O'Sullivan, Rita G.
TITLE Model Dropout Prevention Program at Reidsville Middle School: A Case Study Evaluation.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Symposium of the American Council on Rural Special Education and the National Rural Small Schools Consortium (Tucson, AZ, March 18-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *College School Cooperation; *Dropout Prevention; *Grade 6; Higher Education; *High Risk Students; Intermediate Grades; Middle Schools; *Potential Dropouts; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Rural Schools; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Effectiveness; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This case study describes a 2-year (1988-90) demonstration dropout prevention program, a collaboration between a rural school and a university. The dropout prevention program attempts to identify effective teaching strategies that will increase the academic successes of at-risk sixth-grade students and expand the use of those strategies among the regular teaching staff at the middle school. The teachers often experienced frustration in dealing with at-risk students. Teachers blamed students and parents for the lack of achievement but rarely saw themselves as controlling or influencing students' academic success. During the first project year, a resource teacher saw two groups of at-risk students daily for a two-period math and science block. Students were randomly assigned to the program or to the control group. At the end of the year, project staff agreed that the 23 students involved in the program had benefited. For the following year, the program was expanded to involve all teachers and students in the school. During the second year, a home-school coordinator worked closely with 6 teachers and 20 at-risk students but was available to all students and teachers. The modifications shifted responsibility back toward the teachers and charged them with the task of changing practices to help at-risk students. Although some teachers looked to outside factors for the solution to classroom problems involving at-risk students, other teachers have taken responsibility in remedying the problem by modifying their practices in working with at-risk students. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED340523

MODEL DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM AT REIDSVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY EVALUATION*

Rita G. O'Sullivan
School of Education
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rita O'Sullivan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

March 1990

Paper presented at the
National Rural Small Schools Consortium:
Preventing Rural School Dropouts

*The author would like to acknowledge the support of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's the Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, and the Center for Educational Studies and Development in conducting and presenting this study.

RC018206

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Rita G. O'Sullivan
School of Education
University of North Carolina
at Greensboro
Greensboro, NC 27412
919/334-5100

MODEL DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM AT REIDSVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL:

A CASE STUDY EVALUATION

The Problem

In Summer 1988, Reidsville Middle School, collaborating with two faculty members of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), began a two-year demonstration dropout prevention program. The purpose of the project was to identify effective teaching strategies that would increase the academic successes of at-risk sixth-grade students and then expand the use of those strategies among the regular teaching staff at the middle school.

The term "at-risk" is borrowed from the medical field. Few would argue that someone who smokes cigarettes does not risk lung cancer. Overweight, hypertension, and/or high cholesterol levels place one at risk of developing heart disease. At no time is the outcome a certainty, but rather it is a best guess to inform people that they share common characteristics with people who have succumbed to a particular disease. If dropping out of school is considered as an economically debilitating condition, then it is possible to identify characteristics that place students at risk of dropping out. Within the medical model, malpractice would be failure to prescribe an appropriate remedy for a patient at-risk, e.g., the failure to recommend a low cholesterol diet for a patient with high cholesterol levels. In education, at times, the labelling of students as "at-risk" has been confused with bad practice rather than the failure of teachers to respond appropriately to the condition.

It is methodologically problematic to evaluate strategies that work with at-risk students or change teachers' behaviors. The products and processes in the at-risk context are enormously complex, and the core for what we search often eludes the scrutiny of the more commonly used social and behaviorial science quantitative research paradigms. Case Study research methods accommodate this complexity and allow the investigator to describe the case in sufficient detail that readers may gain new insights (Stake, 1978). Case study methods use a particular way of looking at a situation. A case in this sense can be any bounded system. A bounded system here means that the focus of the inquiry is circumscribed by specific rather than general criteria (e.g., this particular program for at-risk students not programs for at-risk students in general). The researcher describes the case, identifies issues relevant to the case, and then proceeds to

unearth information that will illuminate the issues. While obviously not producing the type of generalizability possible with inferential statistics, the Case Study approach can provide insights into complex situations and thus generate results of scientific merit.

The Case

During the first project-year, a Resource Teacher daily saw two groups of at-risk students for a two-period math and science block. Students were randomly assigned into the program or comparison group using an at-risk rating scaled based on previous year's teacher recommendations, absences, and California Achievement Test (CAT) Scores (O'Sullivan, 1989). Informally, effective teaching strategies were to ripple through the faculty as the demonstration teacher advocated for the students with their regular subject teachers. More formal teacher training occurred in the fall, during a day-long review of the students' progress with all of their teachers and in the spring with a 20-hour continuing education (CEU) training program (2 CEU credits granted toward recertification) aimed at improving teaching strategies with at-risk students.

Based on the first year's events, a number of modifications for the 1989-90 academic year were proposed. The changes focused on promoting greater participation in project activities by the Middle School's students and teaching staff. Project staff members generally agreed that the 23 at-risk students in the program benefited directly from their participation, but that more of the approximately 600 students in the school needed to experience similar benefits. The project also needed an expanded home school coordination component.

Greater project involvement of parents, teachers, and students might establish a more stable program base upon which to continue work with at-risk students beyond the project's two-year funding period. The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation donated $64,000 in personnel costs (demonstration teacher, UNCG faculty time, and a research assistant in the second year of the project) to partially fund the project for two years. The Reidsville City Schools and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro agreed to supplement the foundation's funds (i.e., staff development funds, classroom materials, copying, and a research assistant for the first year).

For the second year of the project (1989-90), a Home-School Coordinator (funded equivalently to a certified teacher) has been assigned to work with a two-teacher sixth grade team and a four-teacher seventh grade team. The Home-School Coordinator works with 20 identified at-risk students (10 from each team), their parents, and their teachers facilitating communication between home and school, advocating for students, tutoring, and providing a special, caring environment for students. Team teachers have met periodically during the year to strategize ways in which they could work with the home school coordinator and UNCG project staff members to increase success for their at-risk students across and within the curriculum.

The modified structure of the project gently tilts the responsibility for students' success back toward the teachers. In the first project year the students in the demonstration classroom were seen as the demonstration teacher's responsibility. With the home-school coordinator supplementing the instructional program, rather than teaching two academic areas, the intent is to shift responsibility back toward the teachers and charge them with the task of changing practice to help at-risk students.

The Context

Reidsville is a small North Carolina city (population 12,400) in rural Rockingham County, North Carolina. In about half an hour the larger cities of Winston-Salem and Greensboro can be reached. The Reidsville City Schools employ 160 classroom teachers, using a high school (grades 10-12), a junior high school (grades 8-9), a middle school (grades 7-8), and four elementary schools (grades 1-6) with kindergarten taught district-wide for the first time this year in one school. Students in the schools are almost evenly divided between African-Americans and Caucasians.

Reidsville is a factory and tobacco town. Most people in Reidsville were born there; their parents and grandparents were too. Income and property values in Reidsville are lower than those in neighboring Greensboro or Guilford County school districts; Reidsville parents have completed fewer years of formal schooling. Consequently, local funds for public education are limited, and teachers salaries are lower in Reidsville than in some nearby school districts.

Reidsville has the eighth highest dropout rate of North Carolina's 139 school districts. The 69 students who left school during the 1987-88 school year might not seem staggering by large city school districts standards, but, in a system with fewer than 1500 students in grades 8-12, 69 students each year represents one fourth of the students lost in five years.

Contrary to common assumptions, state averages, and district proportions, the typical Reidsville dropout is a Caucasian male; African-Americans (the only ethnic minority group reported as dropping out of the Reidsville Public Schools) represent only 17% of all dropouts. During the 1987-88 academic year, comparing the two groups by gender, four times as many Caucasian males (32 vs. 8) and eight times as many Caucasian females (25 vs. 4) dropped out of school. One reason offered to explain this phenomenon, is that these Caucasian parents, many themselves dropouts, feel that their children can do reasonably well, follow in their footsteps, without a high school diploma. African-American parents, however, having greater aspirations see education as a way for their children to go beyond what they have achieved.

Teachers in the Reidsville system often express an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Students suffering from multiple problems cause teachers to view their role as inconsequential. Teachers become frustrated working with students who they perceive are impervious to their best efforts to teach. Parents are often blamed for the students' lack of success. Students are often viewed as plotting against their own learning. Teachers rarely see themselves controlling or influencing the

academic success of their students. Many of the teachers have been in the system a number of years, perceive that they are doing the best possible job under the circumstances, and believe that students are at-risk of dropping out -- not because school may be disengaging, judgmental, irrelevant, impersonal, punitive, or a generally dull place but -- because parents don't support the school and make their children engage in learning.

One bright spot on the horizon for students throughout the system is the creation of school-based teams to address the needs of at-risk students. Teams from each of the schools (including the Middle School) met to formulate dropout prevention action plans. A three-day summer workshop was held in 1989 to move the action plans closer to implementation. During the workshop four UNCG faculty members and one graduate student (including the two co-principal investigators for the Middle School Dropout Prevention Project) worked with teams in large and small groups to ready each school's plan for presentation to the general teaching staff. Groups reported their implementation progress during meetings held with the same group in September, November, and February. These school-based teams appear to have infused a number of teachers with enthusiasm for seeking out ways to reconnect with students at risk of academic failure in their schools. At the Middle School, this positive energy will hopefully carry-over to the demonstration project.

Unclear on the horizon is the question of how the newly appointed Superintendent may influence events. The former Superintendent, whose leadership style could be classified as old school authoritarian (e.g., "You are expected to do whatever I say without question.") was publically and privately supportive of the demonstration project. Before leaving to accept an Associate Superintendency with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, he went on record as authorizing the project to adopt whatever flexibility it might need in the curriculum to respond to the needs of at-risk students. A meeting with the new Superintendent occured in November, but it is unclear, how his expression of support will translate into commitment of future resources. It is also unclear, how the change in superintendents will influence operation of the Middle School. Plans for next year have already been approved that will move grades 6, 7, and 8 into the current Junior High School; the principal of this new Middle School yet to be named.

The Issues

In this case study I explore the issues surrounding teachers' perceptions of and reactions to at-risk students as they unfold during the first semester of the second project year. An underlying assumption of the study is that teachers need to change their instructional practice for the benefit of at-risk students. At-risk students are unable to compensate for mediocre or poor teaching; unable to overcome organizational barriers such as arbitrary classroom rules. There are known instructional and organizational approaches that work with at-risk students. If we were using these successfully, the problem would not be a problem.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Researchers are beginning to use descriptive approaches in the investigation of issues relevant to at-risk students. Casanova (1988) explored home-school relations for at-risk students. Placier (1988) compared risk management in two school contexts. Richardson-Koehler (1988) conducted an ethnographic study to investigate teachers' beliefs about at-risk students. Using extensive interviews with and observations of five second- and third-grade teachers from two schools, she found that teachers' perceptions of who was at-risk in their classroom fluctuated through the school year; that teachers did not necessarily agree about who was at-risk; and that although poor academic ability was used to define risk, operationally teachers viewed the degree of a student's risk in terms of how smoothly that student fit into the class's operation.

Promoting change in teaching practices with at-risk students is an incredibly complex issue about which we lack understanding. Through careful, systematic observation and description of teachers' reaction to the project, we may gain some insights into current teaching practice and how teachers move toward modifying their instruction for at-risk students. The project has introduced an outside stressor on the middle school teachers: to adapt their practice to the needs of at-risk students. Ostensibly, the additional position of home-school coordinator encourages and requires some modification of the current system and contributes to the change process. The purpose of this study is to describe teachers' responses to the project and the activities used to increase success for at-risk students during the first semester of the project. More specific issues to be investigated are: How do teachers perceive at-risk students? Will the home-school coordinator be accepted by the teachers as someone who can assist them with at-risk students? Are the problems teachers identify as barriers to school success for at-risk students solvable? Do teachers see themselves as key change agents in helping at-risk students? Do students want to participate in the project or do they see it as a stigma? How do the school's principal, assistant principal, and counselor view their roles in the project? In what ways, if any, are these teachers changing or remaining the same?

The Method

Information for the study was gathered through observations of teachers, students, and the home-school coordinator. Group and individual interviews were conducted with teachers, students, the home-school coordinator, and the school's support personnel. Because I am one of the project's principal investigators with primary responsibility for the internal project evaluation, I gathered the data as a participant observer. The effect of the project on students outcomes (grades, behavior, absences, perceived competence, goal orientation, standardized achievement test scores) were purposefully not included in this study. A summary of those project results will be available elsewhere (O'Sullivan, 1990) and are not directly relevant to the issues raised in this study.

During the semester three meetings were held at the Middle School with the six teachers participating in the project, the Home-School Coordinator, school support staff, the district's Dropout Prevention Coordinator, and the UNCG project staff; the Superintendent of Schools attended one of these meetings. Early in the semester one planning meeting was held in Greensboro with the Home-School Coordinator, the Assistant Principal, the Counselor, and the project staff. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Home-School Coordinator, the Assistant Principal, and eight of the students in the program. In early January a day was spent reviewing the progress of each of the students in the program with their teachers, the Home-School Coordinator, Assistant Principal, Counselor, Dropout Prevention Coordinator, and two UNCG faculty project staff. The purpose of this staffing of the students' progress was to set goals for each of the students for the second semester. Additional contact between the researcher and middle school staff members occured regularly throughout the semester in conjunction with other activities that were not directly related to the demonstration project.

The Teachers

Teachers entered the project in year two by design, default, and directives. The sixth grade team expressed an interest in becoming more inovlved in the project at the end of the last academic year. These two teachers attended a middle school intitute during the summer that focused on "connecting with the disconnected." Teaching and team assignments weren't finalized until just before school started. The seventh grade team of four teachers was approached at the end of the 1988-89 academic year and declined to participate. The school's Principal decided in August that the same seventh grade team would, in fact, participate, and arranged for them to attend the first project planning meeting. Their reluctance to participate was attributed to their perception that the project was an additional burden the administration was placing on them.

The Home School Coordinator

The Home-School Coordinator came into the program highly recommended and ready to work. She had just finished a year doing similar work in the district and due to funding cuts and her lack of seniority was unemployed for the 1989-90 academic year. At the end of the first project year, the two principal investigators met with the Superintendent and the Dropout Prevention Coordinator to discuss redesigns for the second year. A model using an enhanced home-school coordination component was suggested, and when this new person appeared with such strong credentials, the new emphasis was embraced.

The Second Meeting of the Semester

Children are on their way out the door, calling to one another, hurrying for the buses. Inside the main office, teachers

are picking up mail and their paychecks; one is behind the counter xeroxing. Some of the paychecks need adjusting. One of the project teachers is on the phone trying to straighten out her summer school salary. A few children are quietly waiting on a bench. A parent comes in wanting to see the assistant principal; two other parents appear to be waiting. Enter the five UNCG project team members who have been briefly visiting with the Home-School Coordinator down the hall. The school district's Dropout Prevention Coordinator joins them, and all want to know where the meeting will be held. An announcement is made over the intercom that the meeting acheduled for 2:45 p.m. will be held at 3:00 in the media center.

Most of the project teachers assembled in the media center talk animatedly about the day's events. The media center is not very big; probably two classrooms that had the wall between them removed. Books line the walls of this mini-library with most of the room occupied by eight rectangular tables (eight chairs around each) precisely arranged in four rows of open v-shapes. Tables are rearranged for the meeting with permission of the media center directos. At 3:10 p.m. the meeting begins without two of the six project teachers, the principal, or assistant principal. One of the two Chapter I remedial reading teachers isn't there either. Introductions of UNCG project staff are combined with a short statement of their roles in the project. A seventh grade teacher passes a note received from a parent across the table to a teammate. Next the Home-School Coordinator reviews the progress she's made to date. Teachers begin their reports. Most enthusiasically comment on the Home-School Coordinator's work; no one has anything negative to say. Some express frustration with the In-School Suspension program. The teacher who was on the phone in the office arrives at 3:20 p.m. and leaves at 3:35 p.m. without saying a word. It is agreed that during the first six weeks of school, there should be some flexibility in identifying students from the two teams to work with the Home-School Coordinator. Two of the teachers, in sotto voice, are conversing about a particular problem with one of the at-risk students. Attention sharply focuses as a meeting with the new Superintendent is discussed. Teachers want to be part of that meeting. The meeting is adjourned at 3:50 p.m.

The Kids

You walk into the brick school from the parking lot. On the right are five steps leading up to the office. On the left is a room that might have been a fast-food establishment. One length of the room has a counter that opens into the hallway. The space is long and not very wide (maybe six feet across). As you peer over the counter four children are working around a table studying vocabulary for a social studies test they will take at the end of the week. They are chewing gum, chatting; a fifth young man seated to the side in a chairdesk appears much more interested in engaging the girls in coversation than completing his worksheet. The Home-School Coordinator comes into the room. There is no appreciable change in the children's behavior. She inquires how far they've gotten and instructs them to go over the first 20

questions together for practice. She tells them to complete the second 20 questions for the following day. Two students stop by and ask the Home School Coordinator if they can come and see her next period. She tells them to get a note from their regular teachers. A teacher stops by to clear up some confusion caused by a student not getting back directly after leaving the Home-School Coordinator's classroom. One child asks to call home; she needs her mother to pick her up after school. The Home School Coorinator agrees but tells her that she should have taken care of that before leaving home that morning. The bell rings. The next group of students arrive.

The Home School Coordinator is working with approximately 20 children and their six teachers. In the first six weeks of school the two sixth grade teachers identified 23 children they thought might benefit from the program. Of the original 10 who were selected into the program, three were promoted administratively into the seventh grade project team and one was referred for testing as learning disabled. Three of the remaining 13 in the comparison group then became active and 1 child not on the original list was included. The four-teacher seventh grade team identified 20 students of whom 10 were selected for program participation. One of the 10 transferred to another school, 3 had severe attendance problems, and two did not want to participate in the program. Three of these six open slots were filled by the students who had been promoted from the sixth grade, two were taken by children in the comparison group, and one was newly recommended.

Talking to the kids about their participation in the program they say, "I'm working more of the time" or "I'm doing better in class." One child, in what appeared to be her best imitation of an adult, pulled herself up to full height, put on a very serious face, looked me in the eye and said about the Home School Coordinator, "She's doing an excellent job." One young man told me how he had stopped fighting. Another young lady proudly said that since she had signed her behavior contract she had not done anything to get her sent to in-school-suspension.

The Home-School Coordinator's tutoring, caring, disciplining, and cajoling appear to be having a positive effect on the children. History was made when the highest grade in the class on a map test was made by one of the students the Home-School Coordinator had helped with studying. On that same exam, two of the students who had also studied with the Home-School Coordinator and who had never passed a social studies test tnat year actually made grades of B. A surprise party for the Home School Coordinator, organized by the students with the help of the school's administrators, was a highlight of the semester. The Home School Coordinator has contacted every childs family and by her own admission will do whatever is needed to help a particular child. Her philosophy is that it is important to know what is happening for the child at home but that the school must accept the responsibility for leading the child to success. What works with the children changes all the time. Her job is to come up with new ways of trying to help them. In a meeting that took place toward the end of the first semester, each student's progress was reviewed with their teachers, the Home-School

Coordinator, School Counselor and Assistant Principal, the Dropout Prevention Coordinator, and two UNCG faculty members. Almost all of the students are behind in basic skills, and 10 of the 20 received at least one failing grade for the first nine weeks' grading period. Seven of the 20 appeared to be working well within the program. The most common comment was that the teachers could see "real improvement" in the students behavior, homework practices, or attitude. The serious nature of some of the students' problems also came to light. Problems, particularly among the seventh grade students (perhaps because they are older), warranted recommendations for interventions beyond the program's intent. An individual plan, setting second semester goals, was drafted for each of the students during the staffing meeting.

The Plaudits and Problems

According to the Home-School Coorinator the teachers have in varying degrees changed their practice because she is there. One of the teachers has allowed her to individually administer a test to a student, because they both believed it would improve the results. Teachers share review materials with her. The six teachers vary in their willingness to allow students to work with the Home-School Coordinator during regular class time. The Home School Coordinator would like to have more time with the students; particularly the seventh grade students who she only sees less often than the sixth grade students. In their classes the teachers now use going to see the Home-School Coordinator as a reward.

The teachers have had nothing but positives to say about the Home-School Coordinator. One teacher referred to her as a parent substitute with the teachers making positive reports to the Home-School Coordinator as they would to a parent. The students then receive the positive recognition and reinforcement for good work in class when they see the Home-School Coordinator. Other comments from teachers made mid-semester about the Home-School Coordinator were that she could "put her finger on the pulse - she didn't soft-pedal," "students wanted to go to her, " "it was a privilege and was used to motivate students to complete classwork," "she works with the problem like a bulldog," with "good fussin' and affection." By the end of the semester teachers were still praising the Home-School Coordinator saying, "She doesn't give up," "If she can't find one avenue, she goes to another," "She even takes the time for children who aren't in the program but need her."

The lack of teacher change for the better, since the beginning of school, has been frustrating for some. The sixth grade team appeared to look outward for the solution to their classroom problems with at-risk students. "They're thinking that the Home School Coordinator should have fixed these kids." They're filling out discipline forms for students who fail to bring in textbooks. One of the four seventh grade teachers participating in the project, has voiced general dissatistaction with the school's leadership. This teacher has observed that some of the at-risk students aren't helped by attending school and another place needs to be found for them. Another of the seventh

grade team is experiencing difficulty and has expressed great frustration in teaching some of the at-risk students. On the brighter side, two of the team teachers are not referring students for disciplinary action with the same frequency.

Rather than feeling responsible for students sticking to the letter of the assertive discipline plan displayed on classroom walls, the assistant principal feels that, teachers should shift to saying, "We're responsible for these kids and we want them to feel good about school. We want them to meet with success, and we want to keep their behavior in bounds so that they can go to junior high and people aren't going to kick them out."

Had the project never been set in motion, life for at-risk students at the Middle School could have gone two ways. Without the outside support (the Resource Teacher the first year and the Home School Coordinator the second year), teachers might have assumed more responsibility, perceived the seriousness of the problem, and done more to combat it. On the other had, without the project's outlet for defusing some of the at-risk students' frustrations, teachers might have already hit their threshold and not have felt able to break through.

The Ending

From a teacher at the end of the first semester:

> "It's so easy to give up. The Home-School Coordinator provides us with a good model -- There are no kids to give up on."

References

Casanova, U. (1988, April). Home-school relations for at-risk students. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

O'Sullivan, R. G. (1990, April). Evaluating a model middle school dropout prevention program. Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA.

O'Sullivan, R. G. (1989, March). Identifying students for participation in a model middle school dropout prevention program. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 305 170).

Pacier, P. (1988, April). "Risk Management" in two school contexts: How school organization and culture mediate responses to at-risk students. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Richardson-Koehler, V. (1988, April). Teachers' beliefs about at-risk students. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Stake, R. E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. Educational Researcher, 7, 5-8.